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Indigenous Australian art in practice and theory

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Abstract: At the centre of this article lies the famous *Ngurrara Canvas*, a work of art that has supported land claims in a Native Title Tribunal in the Kimberley region (NT) in 1997. This artwork serves as model case for my discussion of the cross-cultural relevance of Indigenous Australian art. My concern is, in particular, the role European art museums play in representations of the 'Other'. A brief look at some sample exhibitions in Europe supports my perspective on Indigenous Australian art in cross-cultural contact zones.

Keywords: Ngurrara Canvas; cross-cultural (art) theory; non-western art exhibitions.

Introduction

The development of Indigenous Australian art has been widely documented. (Caruana, 1993; Morhpy, 1998; Kleinert & Neale, 2000; Myers, 2002). The Ngurrara Canvas, the sample painting in this article, plays a particular role in Indigenous Australian history, as the following [paper](#) shows. However, it is also an artwork in its own right. This two-fold context of the piece in evidence makes it a useful device for my cross-cultural discussion of non-western art.

The Ngurrara Canvas

The Ngurrara land claim was registered and lodged with the National Native Title Tribunal in 1996. It covers an area of about 78,000 square kilometres in the Great Sandy Desert in the southern Kimberley region. Some parts of the claim are located in the Halls Creek, Derby West Kimberley, Broome, and East Pilbara local government areas. The claim was lodged by the Walmajarri, Wangkajunga, Mangala and Juwaliny language groups. In the aftermath of European invasion, these people had left their

country between the late 1960s and the early 1970s, yet had maintained ties with their country through ceremonies. In the 1980s they gradually started to travel back and revisit their homelands. (<http://klc.org.au/native-title/ngurrara/>)

In accordance with the Mabo High Court decision, they claimed title to their land in 1996, and so in 1997 a session between the claimants and the Native Title Tribunal was set up on the site of the homeland to collect information and data, in order to determine whether the claim would be dealt with at court later on. Soon it became obvious that language differences made communication more or less impossible: the claimants spoke several Indigenous languages, but were not fluent in English, not to mention, in 'high English', whereas the Tribunal officials spoke English, but no Aboriginal languages at all. Pat Lowe reports that "the land claimants held innumerable discussions with lawyers and anthropologists but they were faced with the perennial problem of how to bridge the gulf between two such different laws and world views." (2001: 29) Finally they had a pathbreaking idea:

Instead of merely talking about their claims they would demonstrate it through a painting. The work would be a collaborative effort with each of the claimants painting his or her own piece of country, the area for which they have special responsibility. ... They chose Pirnini, a claypan surrounded by trees, on the edge of the desert and part of their claim. (Lowe, 2001: 29)

Over a period of ten days, the claimants – established artists and new artists – produced a canvas that measured eight meters by ten metres.



Above left: Hitler Pamba and Nada Rawlins completing the Warla section of the Ngurrara Canvas at Pirnini, May 1997. Photo: K. Dayman. Above right: Nyiripirr Spider Snell explaining the Ngurrara Canvas, 2005. Photo: Ngurrara Artists Group.

http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/ngurrara_the_great_sandy_desert_canvas/ho/me

Pat Lowe recalls the Native Title Tribunal, as follows:

The Ngurrarra Plenary Session of the Native Title Tribunal was a smoothly orchestrated event. Some middle-aged, some old, some eloquent and others shy, each claimant in turn stood on his or her section of country as represented on the canvas and spoke about it in their own language, pointing out different features or travel routes to illustrate what was being said. Their words were interpreted for the Tribunal members by one of the three interpreters. No one present could have doubted the truth and significance of these people's long and continuing association with their country. (Lowe, 2001: 30)

The significance of the *Ngurrarra Canvas* is threefold: it is a cultural artefact of immense importance; a political manifestation within postcolonial power factors; a major work of art in its own right:

While the main intention behind the work was political, the aesthetic result of the work of so many different artists is extraordinary. There is no grid-like effect to demarcate separation of territories but a blending of adjacent areas, the flow of the painting imitating the flow of people's movement through the country and of family connections over space. (Lowe, 2001: 30)

I explained elsewhere in more detail the relevance of the Indigenous Law in regard to land ownership and artistic copyright. (2009; 2010) Within the limitations of this article, suffice to cite Ngarraljy Tommy May, one of the artists:

When I was a kid, if my father and my mother took me to someone else's country we couldn't mention the name of that waterhole. We used an indirect language which we call malkarniny. We couldn't mention the name of someone else's country because we come from another place, from different country. That is really the Aboriginal way of respecting copyright. It means that you can't steal the stories or songs or dances from other places. This law is still valid and it is the same when we paint. We can't paint someone else's country. We can paint our own story, our own place, but not anyone else's country. (2001)

In 2007, the State Government of Western Australia accepted connection materials showing that the claimants were the rightful Traditional Owners for the area, and that they had maintained their connection to country. Active mediation commenced in June 2007 and quickly progressed with an in-principle agreement reached in September before the Federal Court finalised a consent determination on November 9, 2007. The Kimberley Land Council acted on behalf of these people “to negotiate the exclusive possession determination which covers crown land in the Great Sandy Desert”. (<http://klc.org.au/native-title/ngurrara/>) Immediately after Traditional Owners were awarded their Native Title rights, they declared a 16,430 square kilometre Indigenous Protected Area or “Aboriginal National Park”, in the north-east section of the claim.

Wayne Bergmann, the Executive Director of the Kimberley Land Council, proposed that an Indigenous Protected Area would assist Traditional Owners to look after country while generating employment opportunities. "Being recognised as the rightful owners of our traditional lands means Aboriginal communities can take control of our country and of our own futures. This is why Traditional Owners work so hard to secure Native Title," he said (ibid).

However, the Ngurrara Land Claim has not yet been fully settled. Sections of land including reserves excluded from the initial Ngurrara claim are being recognised under a subsequent claim known as Ngurrara B. The Ngurrara B application was filed in December 2008. Amendments to the claim were made in May 2009 and the claim is still being dealt with at court. Another claim known as Ngurrara #2 is being proposed to cover any remaining areas of Ngurrara country not included in the original Ngurrara claim and the Ngurrara B claim. If this claim application should progress, it would cover country to the north and north-east of the existing Ngurrara claim, to the borders of the Kurungal claim and the Tjurabalan Native Title determination area. The Kimberley Land Council is currently conducting anthropological work in order to move this proposed application claim forward. (<http://klc.org.au/native-title/ngurrara/>)

The Ngurrara Canvas demonstrates that Indigenous Australian artworks may contain a complex range of what we commonly call 'stories', yet what Indigenous Australians preferably call the Law. The Native Title settlement confirms that the "stories", implied in the artwork, are legal documents that proved and re-established land-ownership. This means that – under certain conditions – the Indigenous Law is valid to date, side by side with the Common Law. One may argue that the Ngurrara Canvas is a special artwork, produced in a special situation and not for the art market (even though it is treated as an artwork and has been successfully exhibited as such all over Australia).

The fact is that a substantial number of 'classical' Indigenous artworks that have been produced for the art market, contain Law narratives. Some artists share particular narratives with art lovers and art buyers, some artists do not. And even if they do so, they will hold back deeper layers of the secret-sacred knowledge; however, the shared cultural texts will help outsiders, such as art lovers, cultural theorists, the art curators, to name a few, to get involved in cross-cultural learning AND aesthetic pleasure.

Research matters

Ever since Indigenous Australian art has been produced for so-called western art markets, art curators (and cultural theorists) have been challenged to accommodate exhibits within (or beyond) the mainstream categories of 'art' and/or 'culture'. The above-mentioned Ngurrara Canvas demonstrates that Indigenous Australian art does not comply with standardised western classification criteria. Consequently, theorists call for defining a new art category that needs to take into account the diversity and specificity of non-western art production. (Gigler, 2008; Morphy, 2008; Wildburger, 2010) I propose elsewhere (2010) to include what I term the 'cultural design' of artworks into the commonly practiced ethnographic assessment of non-western artworks. Such an

interdisciplinary approach certainly affects common curatorial exhibition concepts and offers new epistemological opportunities to a diverse group of people.

It is not the concern of this article to discuss classification categories at great length. Instead, my argumentation focuses on the cross-cultural learning potential of Indigenous Australian art. Evidently, 'art' and 'culture' are adequate categories for the analysis of visual cultural texts. It is commonly held that the terms 'art' and 'culture' are not interchangeable; this view, though, neither leads to the conclusion that the two terms are identical, nor that they are different, as I argue elsewhere (Wildburger, 2010). Art and culture are meaning-making practices that reflect social values and are also capable of establishing, confirming or challenging those values (Schirato & Webb, 2004: 116). Indigenous Australian art offers a complex field of inquiry that challenges researchers in their effort to transform practice into theory. In accordance with Stuart Hall (1997) I am aware that social practices result from relations between culture and power and so I propose that cultural theorists need to create their work within, and simultaneously, outside academia. In this sense, I agree with Gary Hall and Clare Birchall who argue that

Theory is ... about interrogating ... and acknowledging what remains unknown and unreadable, and thus resistant to any exhaustive or systematic interpretation; and which, in doing so, draws attention to the limits of our own theory and thinking, too. (2006: 13)

Any visual artwork is more than just a sum of its components. In a post-colonial context, in particular, also (research) power balance needs be taken into account (Langton, 1993; Smith, 1999; Wildburger 2003; Wildburger 2010). Certainly, creative processes not only draw upon skill and agency; they also offer important insights into human understanding. However, the long-running academic conviction that 'truth' resides within matter does not provide the safety of a common agreement over codified practices any more. On the contrary, research practices are often exercised in spaces between disciplines (Sullivan, 2005: 97-101). I argue elsewhere in detail (2003; 2010) that cross-culturally adequate cooperation is a pre-requisite condition for western theorists and (art museum) practitioners, when dealing with Indigenous (Australian) art. I also propose elsewhere in more detail a useful concept that confirms the researcher's necessity for paradigmatic terms, while also providing analytical space for definitions of individual perceptual experiences (2010). Scholars commonly distinguish between scientific research as rationalistic process and art practice as expressive, subjective activity. By contrast, I argue in favour of cross-cultural research procedures that see 'new' knowledge as "a function of creating and critiquing human experience" (Sullivan, 2005: 181). My emphasis here is on the necessity to move in cognitive processes beyond existing boundaries. Although there are, of course, accepted bodies of knowledge, it is important to clarify that meaning is constructed, rather than found; in addition, meaning is culturally mediated and transformed by different domains. Researchers are challenged by the ongoing tension between established codes of (re)cognition and new (bodies of) knowledge; this is all the more so the case in cross-cultural encounters. The capacity to think in new ways is paramount for research into art practice, or qualitative, cross-cultural research, for that matter (Wildburger 2010).

Indigenous Australian art holds a high potential for cross-cultural learning. The perception of visual elements is determined by our interests, tastes and individual preferences. The way we make sense of what we see is determined by what Schirato and Webb aptly call 'cultural literacy'; they define this factor as "a general familiarity with, and an ability to use, the official and unofficial rules, values, genres, knowledge and discourses that characterise cultural fields" (Schirato & Webb, 2004: 18). Artists operate within a social context, but "visual texts rarely provide a clear narrative, they certainly work as 'metaphorai' – providing vehicles that enable viewers to 'go somewhere else', or to craft a story" (Schirato & Webb, 2004: 82). In this sense, works of art reflect cultural codes within a complex system of meaning. Readers (and viewers) are social creatures that make sense of their lives, and of images for that matter, in connection to narratives that are embedded in particular contexts of time, causality and place. Hence, narratives of visual texts are sites of interaction that provide much space for communication and interpretation, as well as "a huge narrative potential and great expressive power: the ability to convey emotions, ideas and attitudes; and to direct readers [and viewers] to particular narratives" (Schirato & Webb, 2004: 104).

Learning in cross-cultural contact zones happens in diverse places. An important role in mediating and creating cultural imagery play certainly (art) museums:

Indigenous Australian art in European museums

The role (and epistemological importance) of museums (and art museums, for that matter) have been widely discussed (Weil 1990; Karp & Levine 1991; Coombes 1994; Bennett 1995; Bennett 2004; Hakiwai 2005; Sherman 2008). Both art museums and art history are supposed to do the impossible: to form one whole out of very different perspectives on diverse, yet interrelated issues. Art museums rely upon mechanisms of evidence and some causality. Their effort also includes some sort of anachronism that aims at establishing and confirming their concepts of rationality. It is the aim of museums to construct evidence, yet they often transform contemporary artworks into historical monuments and deny the exhibits any contemporary context, by doing so (Wildburger, 2010: 227).

For European curators it seems to be problematic to stage exhibitions of non-western artworks. A look at the website of the International Council of Museums confirms my point and suggests that concepts of "difference" are not sufficiently integrated in western concepts of museum officials. The ICOM definition of "museum" reads as follows:

A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment. (<http://icom.museum/who-we-are/the-vision/museum-definition.html>)

The website proudly confirms that ICOM regularly updates this definition “in accordance with the realities of the global museum community”, and that the latest version was adopted – in accordance with the ICOM Statutes – during the 21st General Conference in Vienna, Austria, in 2007 (ibid). Over years, critique has been voiced that museums need to acknowledge and respect the nations whose cultural heritage they possess and exhibit (Karp & Levine, 1991; Hakiwai, 2005); however, the international museum community still seems to be reluctant to add a respective passage into their statutory self-definition. Evidently, museums still attract people by producing effects in regard to principles of difference and otherness. In this regard, I agree with Karp and Levine who are critical of the way how museums represent “Otherness”:

No genre of museum is able to escape the problem of representation inherent in exhibition other cultures. The two perils of exoticizing and assimilating can be found in the exhibitions of virtually every museum that devotes any part of itself to exhibiting culture. Nor are museums that restrict themselves to examining diversity within their own societies able to escape the difficulties described above. (1991: 378)

It is not surprising that cultural theorists widely comment on the role of the museum in creating a society's mental imagery of the “Other”. In the 1990s, scholars identified a crisis of the museum (Weil, 1990; Bennett, 1995); however, the points of critique are still on the agenda. Stephen Weil (1990) rightly claims that the ‘new’ museum is supposed to be about ideas, rather than about objects and artefacts. Given the fact that museums not only represent an imagined past but also take part in creating an imagined future, it is problematic if museums take objects out of their temporal and local context, without taking this factor into adequate consideration (and documentation). Museum visitors commonly have certain ideas of what they are going to see in an exhibition, and curators intend to meet these expectations accordingly (Mason, 2005). This is all the more so the case with art exhibitions; an interpretation of an artwork never occurs neutrally (Wildburger, 2010: 221-229).

In the course of my research of many years I have been to numerous exhibitions of Indigenous art in Europe (and in Australia) and I agree to concerns of Indigenous artists who have occasionally voiced in personal communication that (mainstream) Europe seems to be a difficult place for non-western art. For the sake of my argument, I will briefly comment on selected European art museums. A museum that attracts much attention (and that spreads its ‘message’ widely in media coverage) is the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris. The problematic curatorial concept of this institution has been commented on in detail (Price, 2007) and cannot be dealt with in detail in this article. For the sake of my argument, I will focus on the museum's self-definition (that obviously fully accords with the above-mentioned ICOM Statute):

The museum is conceived as an instrument, a tool that facilitates knowing and exploring, displaying and disseminating the resources in its care. This vision is founded on a strong consciousness of the institution's responsibilities concerning heritage and culture and the people who will come into possession of those resources. It is connected to the notion of respect and sharing. This institution is part of the institutions of the Republic, in its respect for law and laïcité ... It is an instrument of citizenship, for our

society among multiple components of the Republic. (Germain Viatte, cited in Dias, 2008: 141; translated into English by Dias.)

Price (2007) has analysed at great length to which extent the concept of the Musée is rooted in French nationalistic thinking; a lengthy discussion of this point is not the concern of this article. Suffice to indicate that the Musée shows “respect” for highly-esteemed national principles of the mother country; however, neither the (colonialist) acquisition history of exhibits is taken into account nor is the cultural diversity of the nations acknowledged whose heritage is on display. On the contrary, at the opening of the museum in 2006, Indigenous Australian art practice was (mis-)used as promotional highlight. Under wide media coverage, famous Indigenous Australian artists were invited to produce artworks on site; it turned out, however, that these artworks were NOT produced in the main building of the museum and are NOT accessible for visitors, as I explain in more detail elsewhere (2010: 235-246).

Another European art museum that raised high expectations with its promotional activities is the Collection Essl in Vienna/Klosterneuburg. In 2001 and 2004 the museum staged two exhibitions of outstanding Indigenous artworks; both shows are documented in two lengthy catalogues that are as problematic as the curatorial concept of the exhibitions themselves, which I comment on in detail elsewhere (2010). The curatorial concept of the museum is explained in the catalogue of the first show:

In Austria, as in most of the rest of Europe, this [Aboriginal] art is little known. ... For this reason, in both this catalogue and the exhibition itself, large areas are dedicated to providing information about the cultural, social and spiritual background of Aboriginal people. Visitors need to be aware of this cultural background to be able to truly appreciate the profound nature and wide range of this art beyond the purely aesthetic pleasure it offers. (Edition Sammlung Essl, 2001: 121; emphasis added)

However, the information given in the show rooms, was incoherent, out of context, and in part incorrect. The same is true for the two catalogues, as I elaborate in detail elsewhere (2010: 246-254). In short, all the museum’s efforts ended in a concept that exoticized Indigenous Australian cultures rather than providing any adequate and correct information about the cultural background of the beautiful artworks on display. It is needless to mention that also the aesthetic qualities of the exhibits did not seem to be in focus of the curators.

A completely different, and arguably innovative, exhibition concept was applied by curators in the Museum Albertina in Vienna. The concern of the museum was the artistic quality of the artworks on display, rather than the cultural context. In 2007 the museum staged the outstanding Donald Kahn Collection of classical Indigenous paintings, produced by path-breaking artists of the Western Desert region. The artworks were presented as artworks in their own right. I have argued elsewhere (2010) in detail in which way this attempt did not fulfil its intention. In short, the exhibition did neither value the cultural context of the artworks (as was not the museum’s intention anyway), nor did the display of the paintings or the debatable catalogue take into account the high aesthetic-artistic quality of the 37 masterpieces: paintings of similar style, origin and narrative themes were displayed out of context in different rooms of the exhibition, and

no aesthetic-artistic line through the show was discernable either. Besides, the catalogue did not meet any contemporary standards; in fact, it was a re-edited version of an exhibition-catalogue of the same collection in Munich in 1994, and it definitely showed its age.

By contrast to the above-mentioned European museums, the Aboriginal Art Museum in Utrecht (The Netherlands) has managed over years to meet cross-cultural criteria and art-market expectations with the curatorial concept of their art exhibitions. To my current knowledge, curators of the Dutch museum co-operate closely with Indigenous artists and curators, as well as with (mainstream) Australian art experts that have successfully acted in the cross-cultural art domain for years. This approach is certainly a successful strategy for exhibitions of non-western art in Europe. I propose that European art curators take also guidance from concepts of excellent cross-cultural art exhibitions in Australia, such as the *Land Marks* exhibition of Indigenous art (2006) in the Ian Potter Centre of the National Gallery in Melbourne, or the exhibition *Origins of Western Desert Art: Tjukurrjanu* (Sept. 2011-Feb. 2012) in the same place. Excellent catalogues of both exhibitions support my argument that non-western art exhibitions can attract (and educate) a diverse audience if two perspectives are adequately interwoven and properly taken into account: the appropriate cultural context of the artworks AND the aesthetic-artistic features of the exhibits.

If non-western art is exhibited in cross-cultural contact zones, it is paramount to take into account what I term the “cultural design” (2010) of artworks; such an approach will not only acknowledge the cultural relevance of works of art and will respect the cultural heritage of the artists’ environment, it will also give credit to the artistic peculiarity of the exhibits.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that our views of art (and of the “Other”) are socially constructed. This article supports my argument that art museums play an important role in the formation of a society’s mental imagery of the “Other”. European museums are called upon to accord their curatorial concepts with cross-culturally adequate criteria, if non-western art is displayed. To my view, it is the task of art museums to foster cross-culturally appropriate communication and understanding. Artworks hold a high educational potential, and this is all the more so the case with artworks in cross-cultural contact zones. In cross-cultural art exhibitions we learn about ourselves through perceiving difference. In an effort to make sense of our experiences, we investigate thoughts and ideas that result from artworks that are not rooted in our own social and cultural environment. Non-western artworks, in particular, may challenge our own established way of thinking and may teach us to acknowledge the limits of our mental constructs. In this sense, art museums play a substantial role as they hold the opportunity to teach their visitors aesthetic AND cultural sensitivity, which in its turn may induce people to make sense of cultural difference and to acknowledge and respect human diversity in general.

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